

THE CAPTAIN'S
Bride

A NOVEL

*"Bergren's writing talents unfurl in this historical
page-turner—I loved it!"*

—LIZ CURTIS HIGGS

LISA TAWN BERGREN

PRAISE FOR LISA TAWN BERGREN'S *THE CAPTAIN'S BRIDE*
BOOK ONE IN THE NORTHERN LIGHTS SERIES

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—*Booklist*

“This extremely well-written novel will take you places you have never been before. The heartaches and victories of these women will make you keep turning the pages and leave you breathless until the third book in the series is in your reach.”

—*Rendezvous*

THE NORTHERN LIGHTS SERIES

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LISA TAWN BERGREN



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For Dan, Cara, and Madison Grace Berggren,
With love

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NORTHERN LIGHTS SERIES

The Captain's Bride

Deep Harbor

Midnight Sun

n e w h o r i z o n s



June–September 1880

o n e



Elsa Anders knew she would remember everything of this moment, even as an old and bent woman. The scent of sea and wild clover, the vision of seven peaks about her, the feel of the cold North Sea's stiff wind that would leave her cheeks chapped and rosy come morning. This high up, it was cold enough to make her nose run. She reached for her handkerchief, but as usual, her father was already ahead of her, offering his instead. She took it gratefully, feeling the impact of the realization that he might never hand her anything again. For she was going. Far away and forever, it seemed.

Papa himself was uncommonly quiet tonight, Elsa mused, undoubtedly dreading what she herself dreaded: parting. In two days, she was to wed her beloved Peder. Her heart skipped at the thought of it, and her breath became even more labored. *Peder, oh Peder*. Her darling, who had finally come home to claim her as his own! Her heart swelled with pride at the thought of him. He had stood so proudly at the helm of the *Herald* as it entered port last week! Such a vision he was: all manly man, standing several inches taller than her own impressive height. His long brown hair had a slight rakish wave

to it, and on top, the sun-bleached highlights common to sailors. In the year since she had last seen him, his face had matured. Lines at his eyes had deepened, and his skin was tanned to a golden bronze. How could such joy walk hand in hand with such sorrow? How could she walk by his side while leaving her entire family and the only home she had known for her twenty years of life?

Elsa looked west and then east, crying out silently to God. *Please, Father, tell me this is right, tell me this is good.*

There was no moon, but Elsa needed no illumination. She knew the landscape by heart. A million stars glittered high above the mountains that towered over Bergen and the darker, winding coastline of the Byfjorden. Turning a corner around an outcropping of rock, she could see below her the ancient city of Bergen, its warm lights twinkling softly. The town had once been the biggest trade port in Norway, surpassing even Copenhagen in the Middle Ages. In recent years, the pace had slowed, shipping traffic had moved on, and Bergen was left to find its own way in a new age.

Silently, she and her father reached their destination and sat on a large, flat stone and looked to the heavens. The two of them had come to this spot countless times, this place that Elsa, as a child, had named Our Rock. Her father, a slight man with a bone structure that Elsa had inherited, took her smooth hand in his withered, arthritic-bent one. Elsa thought that if she could travel back forty years, their fingers would be nearly identical: long and thin, yet strong. Perfect for a career as a shipwright, which was what her father had worked at for decades, forming, modeling, building ships. The longing to draw her own plans—or anything else for that matter—gripped her as she stared at the stars. But her destiny lay elsewhere. She was to be Mrs. Peder Ramstad, and she would find her fulfillment in that. Yet the ships in port called to her. Many were majestic vessels, and Elsa could see them in her imagination, crashing through a cyclone's worst wave, brave and formidable. . . .

Her father cleared his throat as if to speak, and her attention

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immediately focused back on home and the present. How could she leave her dear old father? The agony of it threatened to break her heart. Oh, why could her parents not come with them to America? Why did she have to leave her loved ones to have another?

Elsa could hear him take in a breath, and then, after a moment, sigh heavily. An old ship designer who married his beloved Gratia years behind most couples, Amund Anders had started his family late in life. Somehow, Elsa intuitively knew that this made it harder for him to let any of his brood go. And she was going. Her heart beat triple fast again at the thought of it. In two days' time she would wed. The day after, she and Peder would sail for America.

Her father tried again. "Elsa, my sweet, many dangers are ahead of you. Are you certain of this path?"

"As certain as I can be, Papa. I know that I love Peder with all my heart."

Amund harrumphed, then remained quiet for a moment. Then, "Love is a good thing for a young heart. But it is not always the best compass in trying to find one's way. This immigration"—he cast about for the right word—"fever is like the smallpox. It threatens Bergen like the angry blisters the pox leaves on one's skin."

"Or perhaps it is like scarlet fever," she answered carefully, "leaving one with a new appreciation for life."

Her father nodded, relishing her banter. Elsa knew how he would miss their intellectual sparring. Her older sister, Carina, seemed to have not a thought in her head, while her younger sister, Tora, was too busy to stop and indulge in the pleasure of conversation and discussion.

"Papa," she began, looking toward the skies again, "I must know. Do you disapprove of Peder?"

"Do I disapprove?" he scoffed. "I disapprove of the fact that he is taking my darling daughter away from me. I disapprove of the fact that you will not be here to comfort me in my old age. But of the boy himself? I cannot disapprove. The boy . . . the *man* is like a son to

me.” Amund turned to Elsa and cradled her cheek in his hand. “I am so happy for you, Elsa. I am happy that you’ve found your own beloved as I found my own in your mother. But permit me to grieve. I promise. On your wedding day, I will celebrate your union and not grieve any longer. But tonight, please allow an old man a bit of sadness.”

A huge lump grew in Elsa’s throat, and tears welled in her eyes. How did she know that this was right? Did she truly know Peder anymore? They had been inseparable as children, but he had been off to sea for the last ten years. Oh, but when he had come home, all the old feelings were there, along with something new. There was a maturity and solidity about their love now, built upon a lifetime of friendship and, over the last three years, a courtship of letters. Yes, Peder was the man for her, her beloved.

“You haven’t thought more about going with us,” she said carefully.

“No. You know my feelings, daughter. Bergen is where I was born. Bergen is where I will die. Your mother and sisters and I are where we are to be. You, my sweet, have been called to a different path.”

Elsa knew her father’s answer by heart. He had proclaimed it three years ago when their pastor, Konur Lien, had first raised his proposal of going as a large group to the new Promised Land, as he had called it. Together they would be stronger, more successful. Together, they would flourish. He had waved a letter from Peder, promising to take them to America. Their departure date was set for June 1880 and had set the town abuzz not only because of the excitement but also because of the sheer bravado of such a letter sent from a second mate who planned to be a captain.

“The pompous boy who would be captain,” people had called Peder Ramstad. Elsa had defended him, sticking her nose in the air as if to say they knew not of whom they spoke, but privately fretted that

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they were right. Who had Peder become? And were his tender words, written in his strong, manly script, a passing fancy or the seedlings of love? Gradually, Elsa found strength in her trust of the man who found a way home to visit at least once a year. Still, for years she had wondered and waited, looking to sea, hoping against hope that each day would bring Peder home to her for good or that he would take her with him the next time he departed.

“What are your hopes for the future, child?” her father asked, interrupting her daydreaming.

“My future?” She paused to think before speaking. “A good marriage to Peder, lots of children, a good home.” And maybe a career as a shipwright or an artist, she mused silently, yet unable to voice it. A woman’s career was never a point of discussion in the Anders household. She sighed. Perhaps it would not be welcomed in Peder’s home either.

“They are good aspirations,” he said in approval. “You will make your mama and me proud.”

His uncommon words of praise again brought Elsa near tears. She looked at him, squinting, trying to see what he must be feeling by his expression, but the light was too dim. Suddenly, a green light shimmered on the horizon, lighting up the entire mountain range. “Papa, look!” The lights grew, sending streaks southward toward them and then filling the streaks in with horizontal waves of red and purple, reminding Elsa of the inner iridescence of a seashell. The movement was like a tiny wave upon the sand, uneven in its climb, ebbing and flowing.

“Ah, yes!” her father cried, leaping to his feet and dancing a little jig. “It is appropriate for such a night as this. Do you remember what I told you as a child?”

Elsa stood beside him and hooked her arm around his thick waist. “I do. You said the lights were symbolic of God whispering to me.”

“Yes,” he nodded in approval. “They are a hint of heaven’s

splendor.” He was more visible now in the soft light from the north. Twin streaks of glistening tears ran down his weathered cheeks, and at the sight of them, a lump rose in Elsa’s throat.

They stood there silently for a moment, looking toward the fjord that reflected the aurora borealis in unearthly hues. “I will always cherish these memories, daughter. Thank you for making an old man’s life so full of joy.”

“Oh, Papa . . .”

“Remember your old father when you see the lights, will you, Elsa?”

“If you will remember me.”

He turned toward her. “You, Elsa, will never be out of my thoughts for more than a day. I will pray for you and yours every day, as will your mama.”

“And I for you.”

Father and daughter embraced while the northern lights continued to dance high, high above them.



Kaatje Janssen smiled, thinking of her dear friends marrying on the morrow, the beautiful northern lights she had witnessed with her husband last night as they lay together under the spring night sky, and Pastor Lien’s sermon to come this morning. It would be his last in Bergen. As she finished her chores in the kitchen and began to prepare for church services, she caressed the slight bulge beneath her apron. Her belly was hardening and her hips widening by the day. Last night she was sure that her amorous husband’s warm hands would at last discover the treasured secret her womb held.

Oh, how she had prayed to the heavenly Father that Soren would be pleased! Perhaps this was just what they needed to solidify their marriage and stay his wandering eyes. She finished the breakfast dishes and wiped her hands on her apron, smiling again as her fingers brushed her stomach. Today would be a good day to tell him. If she waited until they boarded the ship, he might be angry.

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As she dumped the wooden pail of dishwater outside their tiny cottage, Kaatje glanced toward the barn, situated just beyond the house. She would miss this cozy home and their small farm, but what she and Soren needed now was a new start, for themselves and their baby. A girl? That would be nice. But a boy would be so helpful to Soren as he plowed the new soil that was said to be as fertile as Eden. At least a boy would be of some help in five or six years. But she was getting ahead of herself. Where was that man, anyway?

With a smile, she wound her creamy blond hair up into a knot and set out toward the barn to get Soren. He only had a few minutes to wash up and change for church. Humming, she walked across the spring grass in their yard, feeling cool, damp strands against her skin where they cleared her slippers. Low voices inside the barn brought her to an abrupt halt. She swallowed hard.

A low moan, a soft giggle. Soren's husky voice, the way he used it when he wanted Kaatje. *No. Please, God. Please, Father in heaven. Not again.*

Steeling herself, she took hold of the barn door and pulled it open. The creaking and groaning silenced the couple's noise and movement as Kaatje's eyes scanned the dark interior, fighting to adjust to the poor light. What they found confirmed her worst fears. In a stall, her handsome Soren, the man no woman could seem to refuse, stood very near Laila, who looked at Kaatje with a horrified expression. Laila's milking apron straps were off her shoulders, her dark hair pulled from its knot, and it took Kaatje only half a second to understand what had transpired.

"Elsklings!" Soren began, his face a mask of consternation. "My love, this isn't what it looks like." In three powerful strides, he covered the distance between them while Kaatje fought for the energy to move. She felt numb, like a bird frozen in the snow. His hands were on her shoulders, moving down to cover her arms, as if he intended to hold her there until she understood. But she understood. She understood only too well.

“Oh, Soren,” she breathed. Kaatje glanced up to meet his fiery blue eyes, normally so bright and gay, but already steeled for the argument they were sure to have. A sudden bolt of fury broke Kaatje from her dreamlike reverie.

“You told me it was over! That there would be no others ever again!” She wanted to spit in his face and struggled to escape his giant hands. “Let me go! Your hands are defiled! You do not deserve to touch me!”

Her words seemed to pierce his defensive armor, and the blush of excitement on his cheeks faded to pale gray. He ducked his head and looked down at her like an errant schoolboy confessing to a schoolmarm. He knew that look always melted her heart. Quick tears laced his lashes. “You are right, *min kære*,” he said humbly.

Behind him, Laila edged out of the door and fairly ran for home. She was little more than sixteen years of age, compared to their own twenty, but age did not seem to matter where Soren was involved. He had the powers of the wind, seeming to gust in and capture any female heart he could, surrounding, pulling, easing them away from their moorings. And he seemed to have a distinct preference for brunettes.

“No,” Kaatje said, brushing wisps of hair from her face. “No more, Soren. I will not forgive this.” She shook her head as if deriding herself. “When you wanted to hire a milkmaid, I fought off my feelings of fear and suspicion. But I was wrong! It was not fear . . . it was God! The Lord was trying to warn me that there cannot be a woman within sight for you! The only way you could stay true to me is if we were alone for a hundred—no, a *thousand*—square miles!”

She whirled and stomped away from him, tears blinding her path. *Not again, God! Oh, I can't bear it!*

“Kaatje!” Soren cried, his voice cracking like a scared child's. In moments he had her in his arms again. He spoke in broken English as she struggled to get away. “I am sorry. I am so sorry! I don't know

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what is wrong with me! It is like an illness! I am sick. You must help me to get better!”

He knelt before her, crying, his blond curls pressed against her abdomen. Kaatje, still shaking with anger, fought off the urge to place her hand on his head. Soren lapsed into Norwegian as he begged her forgiveness. “Please, Kaatje. Please forgive me. It will be better in America. I promise. Please, please.” His sobs and their native tongue—largely unspoken in their house since they had committed to go to America and had taken up English lessons—tore at her heart in a new way. She had never seen him so completely broken. Everything in her pulled Kaatje toward comforting him. But he was the one who had wronged her! Was this simply a new tactic? Just then, she glimpsed the figure of Laila in the distance as the girl ran over a hill and out of sight. Kaatje pulled at Soren’s hands, wanting only to be away from him.

But she was too late. His eyes lit up through his tears and he glanced at Kaatje in wonder. She made another half-attempt to wrench free, but her strength seemed to be gone. She had waited so long for the joy of this moment! His large hands wandered over her stomach, searching, clarifying, frantic in their questioning. One more glance into her eyes and all his questions were answered.

Soren jumped up with a tremendous shout, then reached down to lift her in the air, spinning her around until she felt dizzy. His exuberance melted the edge off her anger. Crazy, a smile edged her lips.

“Soren, let me down,” she said wearily.

“Oh, yes, yes,” he said contritely, immediately doing as she bid. “I must be careful with you. With both of you.”

She glanced away—embarrassed that she was forgiving him yet again—and moved toward the house, but Soren gathered her up into his arms again. Kaatje gave in to the embrace, sorrowfully longing to be reassured, longing for her husband. With her head resting against

his chest, the tears flowed while Soren once again promised undying faithfulness.



“Father, you must let me go,” Tora Anders railed, pacing as her father sat at the breakfast table, serenely drinking his coffee.

Elsa closed the door of their modest home behind her and remained quiet, listening to her sister and her father rehash an argument that had grown old. It was no use trying to sneak down the hall without disturbing them. From the kitchen, the front entry was visible, and both her father and Tora had glanced over at Elsa.

“No, Tora. You are sixteen and will do as I bid until you marry and have a good man to look after you. I will not be sending you off alone without proper supervision.”

“Proper supervision? What is Elsa?” Tora cried, gesturing toward the door and her older sister. “I do not know of anyone more proper than she.” *Ah*, Elsa thought, hiding a small smile. *She has changed tactics*. Earlier Tora had tried to get the whole family to go, then to convince their father that she was old enough to handle herself. Now she had given in to the last ploy—that he would entrust her to Elsa’s care, a thought that had previously made her younger sister shudder.

Quietly, Elsa observed father and daughter. Tora had inherited Papa’s olive skin—and the dark, chestnut hair he once had—as well as large, expressive eyes that often spoke more loudly than words. In her father’s Elsa saw a menacing storm cloud that could always make her turn away. But not Tora.

“We will not talk of this again, Tora. I have decided.”

“Decided?” Tora said, her voice high and tight. She stood, placing her hands on her hips. Her skin blanched and her hair, in contrast, seemed to darken to the color of night. She and Elsa shared only one physical characteristic: startlingly blue eyes, inherited from their mother. Now, in anger, they looked like the color of a turbulent sea in winter. “How can you decide? Perhaps I will go anyway, in spite of

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your decision. What would you think of that?" she challenged, tossing her head.

Her father stood quickly, bumping his chair over in the process. Even after years of stooping over his drawings, he was a tall man. Yet Tora stood her ground, staring up at him in open defiance. It was at that moment that their mother chose to enter the kitchen and gently edge between the two.

"Tora, sweetheart," reasoned Gratia, "I know this is difficult for you. But Elsa is going on to a new life. She must have some time alone with Peder for a bit before she takes on any family responsibility." Her face took on a merry look. "Besides, she might soon have a baby. She cannot look after you too."

"Oh!" Tora said in frustration, her hands balled into white-knuckled fists. "You all treat me as such a child! I will go to America. You will see. One way or the other, I will get there!"

With that, she edged past her sister and slammed the door behind her.

Elsa's mother sighed as her father sat down heavily. "She's a wonder, that one," Gratia said, as if commenting on the impish tactics of elves instead of their daughter.

"Perhaps I should allow her to go and sleep easier at night." Amund glowered. "Is it my judgment that I should raise three daughters?" he asked, gesticulating toward the ceiling.

His wife ignored him. "Come," she said to both him and Elsa, "We must go if we are to make it to church on time. Now where is Carina?"



"May I drive, Father?" Peder Ramstad asked, gently touching Leif Ramstad's shoulder.

Leif turned to regard his son, studying him eye to eye, and then nodded once. He immediately climbed into the elaborate surrey's second long seat, ducking to avoid the fringed roof, joining his wife,

Helga, and their daughter, Burgitte. All were impeccably dressed, as suited a wealthy family in Bergen on a Sunday morning. Peder's older brother, Garth, heir to the Ramstad shipping fortune, took the front seat beside Peder. "Your last day at home, eh, little brother?" He clapped him on the back as Peder shook the reins, sending the matched span of geldings into a quick trot toward church.

Behind them was the large family home that bordered the shipyard and faced the North Sea. Peder glanced back at the house, which had been built in the Italianate style after his father had returned from an inspirational trip to Europe. Peder had to laugh when he considered that at home he longed for the sea, and while crossing the Pacific, the Atlantic, the Indian Ocean, or elsewhere, his thoughts often pulled him home. At sea, he could mentally trace the low roof and overhanging eaves with decorative brackets, the entrance tower, the round-headed windows with hood moldings, the arcaded porch, and his bedroom on the second floor.

It was from that bedroom, as a young lad, that he had watched ship after great ship, built and launched from Ramstad Yard, and longed to go on each one. Over the past decade, he had done just that. Now, at twenty-four, he had accomplished his second goal at an uncommonly young age: captaining his own ship. And he had done so by stubbornly refusing a position on any Ramstad ship; never did he want anyone to attribute his success to anything other than hard work and well-deserved rewards. The *Herald*, a bark-rigged clipper, sat proudly at Bergen's docks, awaiting those immigrants who would accompany them in two days' time to America. But the most important passenger would be his wife.

He smiled as the sweet, warm coastline air filled his nostrils and the surrey glided over the macadam road toward town. She had never left his thoughts, it seemed. Like his childhood home, he was irresistibly drawn to Elsa Anders. In all his years away from Bergen, she had filled his nights with elaborate, fanciful dreams. At sea, facing the doldrums, Peder had filled his days with decisive plans for the future.

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On the still waters, safely past the Roaring Forties, Peder would stare out to sea and imagine his beloved as a mermaid, her corn-silk hair floating in exotic waves about her sculpted face, her blue eyes matching the water around her, beckoning him to join her. Long ago he had decided he would return to Bergen and claim Elsa as his own. But not until he reached a position of influence. Not until he was captain and could build her a decent home. How he had prayed that her heart would not, in the meantime, favor another!

Peder had returned as often as he could, signing on for ships with routes that ported at Bergen. And each time he had found Elsa more beautiful, inside and out, than he had remembered her. He had last left her a year prior, promising to return for her as captain of his own ship. Others had laughed, but not his beloved Elsa. She had nodded once and said, "I will see you then, my future husband." The secret had remained theirs until a fortnight past. Then, all of Bergen learned that the captain had returned for his bride.

Leif's gruff voice shook Peder from his daydreaming. "You should not be going again, son. You have had your journeys and adventure. Garth could use your experience at sea to our advantage at Ramstad Yard. Together, as brothers, you could build our company to new heights."

Peder glanced at Garth, who met his look. He spoke to his father over his shoulder as he drove. "Garth knows quite enough about running the family business. And as much as I want to run a yard of my own, I believe I must be in America. Father, you should see it—"

"Pshaw," his father exclaimed. "What could America have on our Bergen? Here, we have a port over four hundred years old. There, the entire country is barely a hundred. Who can find confidence in a government so young?"

"Governments come and go, as we have seen here," Peder said. "But I tell you, I love the democratic constitution of the United States, and I would die to keep her free." He swallowed hard. Then, lowering his voice, he said, "I want something of my own, Father. I

always have. First it was captaining my own ship. Now I will build another Ramstad Yard. In America. I will make you proud, Father, as Garth will continue to make you proud here.”

Garth clapped Peder on the shoulder with an understanding smile. “I envy you, little brother. Such freedom.”

Leif groaned from the backseat. “You young men don’t know what you have. When Amund and Gustav and I were at sea, we had to entertain thoughts of how to begin our own yard when we had nothing. You, at least, come from a position of power and money. It is an edge that I envy. Not the freedom.”

“Yet you are an old man who has had his share of freedom,” piped up Peder’s mother, Helga. She was a strong, stalwart woman who had had much to do with the success of Ramstad Yard. She leaned forward between her boys, a hand on each. “He talks like a big man, but once he had dreams that were as frivolous as a child’s.”

Leif let out a sound of muted outrage as the rest of the family laughed. At heart, the big man with the tough exterior was as soft as a loving old hen.

“At least you men have the choice of whether or not to go,” Burgitte joined in. “I think it is most unfair that I must wait for a man to take me away.”

“Knowing you, Burgitte,” Peder said, smiling, “you will find just the right man to take you exactly where you want to go.”

“Yes,” Garth said, turning around. “You, baby sister, are as weak and mindless as our dear mother.”

Returning his smile, Burgitte batted away his hand, which threatened her with a pinch. “So I know my own mind. Is that a sin?”

“Oh no,” Peder said, catching sight of his bride-to-be in the church courtyard. “On the contrary. It is an attribute.”



Karl Martensen took the bentwood butter box from his father’s hands and spread the white, creamy mixture over his mother’s fresh-baked

rolls. Sonje Martensen finished placing food on the table and passed wise eyes over her son.

“What is bothering you, child?”

“Mother, I am not a child. I am a man of twenty-four.”

His mother continued to study him, and he looked away, knowing that she was memorizing his features as if she would never see him again. All three of the Martensens had ash blond hair and large bones, but it was his father, Gustav, that Karl most resembled. Karl glanced at his father, who was leaning over his plate, silently shoving food into his mouth. It was as if he was looking into the mirror and could see his own reflection thirty years hence. Hopefully his hair would not recede as his father's had. Gustav's nose drooped a bit at the end, and his cheeks sagged as if weighted. In contrast, Karl's mother, who sported her own lines of aging, had pink, rounded cheeks and gentle smile lines at her eyes and mouth. Karl glanced from one to the other. He hoped he would inherit his mother's lines more than his father's. *I must smile more*, he silently reproved himself.

As if signing on for the effort, he smiled purposefully and said, “Will you always think of me as a boy?”

“Yes, my son,” Sonje said, leaning over to hold his arm softly. “You age, but so do I. So I will always feel old and you will always feel young.” Her look sobered. “So tell me what is bothering you.”

A quick image of Elsa Anders burst through his mind. She had stood on the hill of the peninsula as Peder and he had brought the *Herald* to port. Even at a distance, Karl had recognized her proud stature and golden flying hair, a dark blue cape at her shoulders to guard against the early summer's evening breeze off the water. *Away*, he willed the image. *Away*. Instead he focused on today. “It is . . . it's just that . . .” he cast about for the right words and then urged confidence into his tone. “You see, I have become a Christian.”

Gustav Martensen looked up at his son for the first time and quit chewing. He dropped his knife noisily on his plate as if in

disgust. “No son of mine will be a lousy, two-faced, hypocritical Christian.”

Karl lifted his chin and did not blink. He stared back at his father, refusing to look away as Gustav had routinely made him do as a child. “I am sorry, Father. I’m afraid I’m a grown man and can do what I wish. And I am sorry the Christian faith fills you with such memories of anger. It is not all about that. It is not all about grandfather and the way he was. You should know that from knowing your Christian friends like Amund and Leif.”

Gustav stood, trembling with anger. He shook his finger at his son. “You will not disrespect your elders in my home!”

“I mean no disrespect,” Karl said, wiping his mouth with the rough, cloth napkin and methodically laying it beside his plate. “Thank you for breakfast, Mother. Would you care to join me for church? We’re late, but we can still make it.”

He glanced at her, but she was seemingly struck mute. He softened his gaze and his tone. “I am sorry, Mother, I should have told you days ago. But it never seemed right. Today is Sunday. The Lord’s day. I should worship.”

His father glared at him as if he wanted to spit in his face. His features contorted as he struggled to find the right words. “I always lamented having but one son. Now I know why. I risked not having *any* when my boy defied me.” With that, he walked out, slamming the cottage door behind him.

Karl closed his eyes. *Father, let me understand and love him anyway,* he prayed. *Reach out to him. Pull at his heart, as you did mine.*

When he opened his eyes again, he met his mother’s soft gaze.

“I was a Christian once,” she began.



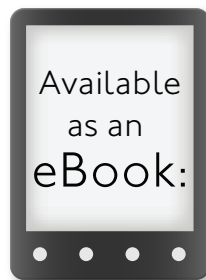
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